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ABSTRACT

The study examined differences in the classroom grading procedures of 91 preservice teachers for labeled versus nonlabeled gifted students. Ss were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: nonlabeled, labeled achiever, or labeled underachiever. Ss were given packets containing student writing samples and were asked to score the papers holistically (ranking a group of papers on general merit). Differences between the gifted achiever and the gifted underachiever were nonsignificant, as were the differences between the labeled and nonlabeled condition. Findings indicated that the label gifted (either achiever or underachiever) did not significantly affect grading. Recommendations are made for future research. (CL)

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The Effects Of Labeling Students As Gifted

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Summary of presentation
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SUMMARY

The Effects Of Labeling Students As Gifted

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The literature on labeling looms large in special education for the handicapped (Hobbs, 1975). However, little work has been done on the problems and/or advantages of being labeled gifted. There is a paucity of systematic investigation in spite of the frequently expressed concern that such a label may cause snobbishness in the person so labeled or may encourage hostility from family, peers, or teachers (Guskin, et. al., 1983). According to Gallagher (1976) labeling the exceptional may have positive effects. In an educational setting labeling may: 1) lead to differentiated treatment, 2) facilitate the search for the causes and prevention of disorders, 3) increase public awareness and encourage funding for research, training, and delivery of services. On the other hand, the label may be detrimental to the child. In discussing the handicapped, Algozzine and Mercer (1980) enumerate the following possibilities: 1) labeling may cause individuals to develop negative feelings about themselves, 2) labels may cause others to view the labeled individual negatively, and 3) labels may generate unwarranted expectations for the labeled individual.

With respect to the gifted, the advantages versus the detrimental effects of being labeled are difficult to tease out of the literature. The large, diverse, and often contradictory literature on teacher expectations furnishes some insight. The often cited, but controversial work of Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) indicates that when teachers are told they have students who should be "blooming", i.e. showing a growth spurt, their reading report card grades reflected the higher teacher expectations. This effect was significant for children in middle tracks, but not so for children in higher tracks. The authors hypothesized that when high expectations are held for children, they may be evaluated against a higher standard by their teachers (Rosenthal and Jacobs, 1968, pp. 107). The conclusions from this research have been reexamined and questions subsequently raised (Baker and Crist, 1971). Thus, teacher expectancy research seems a profitable line of inquiry for the issue of labeling children as gifted.

Others have speculated that being labeled gifted may result in hostility from others toward the labeled child (Clark, 1979; Sanborn, 1979). And, in fact, a few studies indicate that attitudes toward the gifted are affected by the degree of familiarity with the gifted (Weiner, J., 1968; Weiner and O'Shea, 1963). Another study (Jacobs, 1972) indicates teachers hold negative attitudes toward the gifted.

Gallagher (1979) summarized the contradictory perceptions about the gifted which affect our reaction to the label. Our culture respects the gifted

individual who succeeds (particularly one with humble beginnings). On the other hand, our egalitarianism promotes suspicion of persons who may be viewed as elite, even if their favored status is a function of their talents rather than their pedigree. Thus, we are ambivalent about the label of gifted.

According to Algozzine and Mercer (1980), labeling can be investigated from two perspectives: 1) the impact of the label on the labeled individual 2) the impact of the label on others. The present study was undertaken from the second perspective and focused on the effects of the label on the behavior of teachers. Specifically, the study sought to answer the question: Are there differences in teachers' classroom grading practices for labeled versus nonlabeled students?

METHOD

Subjects: Subjects were 91 pre-service teachers enrolled in undergraduate education courses. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of two labeled or a nonlabeled condition. The two labeled conditions were gifted achiever and gifted underachiever. In summary, the three conditions were nonlabeled, labeled achiever, labeled underachiever.

Manipulation: Subjects were given packets of material containing five student writing samples. In the labeled conditions, subjects were provided with brief descriptions of the child who authored each of the five samples. One of the five samples was described as being written by a gifted child, achieving or underachieving depending on condition. The other samples in the two labeled conditions were given a variety of descriptions like average achiever, below average. Subjects were to score the student papers holistically. Holistic scoring is a procedure for ranking a group of student papers on general merit (Cooper, 1977). The best paper would be given the highest rank; the worst, the lowest. Subjects were given a training session on holistic scoring prior to data collection.

Design and Statistics: The design of the study was a 1 x 2 factorial with achiever, underachiever nested under the labeled condition. A preliminary test was done to compare the gifted achiever with the gifted underachiever condition. A second comparison was made between the labeled and the nonlabeled condition.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The differences between the gifted achiever and the gifted underachiever were non-significant ($t=.12$) as were the differences between the labeled

and nonlabeled condition (t=.30). Thus, in the area of classroom grading being labeled gifted did not significantly affect the labeled child. Pre-service teachers did not systematically rank a child's paper lower because he was labeled gifted. This was consistent whether the child was labeled as a gifted achiever or a gifted underachiever. Neither did the pre-service teachers rank the student paper higher because its author was labeled gifted.

Limitations of the study: It would be incautious to interpret these results as an indication that teachers are not influenced by the label of gifted. The inconclusive results do not allow much inference of any kind. A severe limitation of the present study was the unreliability of the dependent variable, the holistic scoring. While the procedure is widely used and quite reliable with trained raters, in the present study, the subjects' scoring was inconsistent.

Recommendations for future research: The present study should be replicated with a longer training period to increase the reliability of pre-service teachers as holistic scorers. Alternatively, another classroom grading task could be substituted for the holistic scoring dependent variable.

In addition, other teacher behaviors toward the gifted should be investigated. Grading is not the only aspect of the classroom situation sensitive to the gifted label. In particular, researchers who harbor a concern for possible negative effects of the label might do well to investigate verbal interactions between child and teacher, teacher supplied information on permanent record cards, and teachers' perceptions of the success and failure of the gifted students in the classroom.

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